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Political, process and programme failures in the Brexit fiasco: exploring the role of policy deception

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ABSTRACT

We propose a conceptual framework of policy deception to help identify, analyse and explain Brexit as a policy fiasco. The framework casts light on the political use of the device of an in/out European Union (EU) referendum by David Cameron. The paper develops the argument that the referendum did not offer a binary choice between two policy options for the United Kingdom's (UK) relationship with the EU representing different, but commensurable preferences, because one option was 'baseless' in that it was unfounded in any policy analysis. The label of policy deception usefully reveals that many of the political, process and programme failures at the heart of the Brexit fiasco have their roots in the referendum. We conclude that the concept of policy deception contributes usefully to emerging work on why the Brexit policy fiasco occurred, and is likely to be a fruitful topic for future work.

KEYWORDS Brexit; David Cameron; policy deception; policy fiasco; political failure; referendum

Introduction

Brexit may well be remembered as a monumental policy fiasco (Dunlop, James, & Radaelli, 2019; Jennings & Lodge, 2019; Kovac, 2019; McConnell & Tormey, 2019). However, the analysis of such failures is never a neutral or objective endeavour (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; McConnell, 2016). Failures are never neatly classified but are constructed, declared and argued over in labelling processes that are not necessarily evidence-based (Bovens & 't Hart, 2016). This presents a challenge to those wishing to identify, analyse and explain Brexit as a policy fiasco.

In this special issue, McConnell and Tormey (2019) argue that the inability of the Conservative government led by Prime Minister Theresa May to deliver

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a Brexit deal by 29 March 2019 was a policy fiasco. They examine three main explanations for this: (1) Brexit as an impossible policy challenge; (2) ineffectual leadership by Theresa May, who took poor decisions and avoided plausible alternatives; (3) Westminster as a partisan-fuelled institution incapable of reaching an agreement on such a bi-partisan issue. The authors conclude that the Brexit fiasco cannot be reduced to a solitary explanation. Instead, analysts should focus on accounting for its complexity by attending to the interplay of agents, institutions/processes and the unique policy challenge of exiting the European Union (EU) within a specified timescale and amid intense inter- and intra- party divisions.

Dunlop et al. (2019) use a policy learning perspective to locate the Brexit fiasco in the period from June 2016 to May 2019, in contrast we concentrate our analysis in the run up to the 2016 referendum. Replacing David Cameron, Theresa May reported in the House of Commons that 'when I first became Prime Minister in 2016 there was no ready-made blueprint for Brexit' (May, 2018). Well over three years later, and after two general elections called on the issue of Brexit, there is still no blueprint. In October 2019, the journalist Martin Kettle wrote, 'Brexit won the vote. But it's an ideology not a policy. When its supporters tried to turn it into policies, as they are still trying to do, it fell apart' (Kettle, 2019). In this paper, we argue that that the referendum did not offer a binary choice between two policy options for the United Kingdom's (UK) relationship with the EU representing different, but commensurable preferences, because one option was 'baseless' in that it was unfounded in any policy analysis.

Following McConnell's (2016) criteria, we argue that the Brexit policy fiasco is a perfect storm of the following combined failures: political (failure of Cameron's political performance in terms of winning the referendum and achieving his primary goal of a renegotiated agreement between the UK and the EU), process (failure to initiate and complete the necessary policy-making processes for exiting the EU) and programme (failure to design a policy framework for UK's future relationship with the EU). We ask the question: Was the Brexit policy fiasco a case of policy deception? The paper develops the claim that the Leave option may be classed as such because it was a baseless voting option that deceived some voters into believing that leaving the EU was an established and available policy pathway.

Policy fiascos

Our analytic position is based upon the etymology of the word 'fiasco', which is theatre slang for 'failure in performance' and deriving from the Italian 'far fiasco', meaning to 'suffer a complete breakdown in performance' (Ayto, 2011). Used in the current context, fiascos are failures of political performance. However, the etymology of the word suggests that such failures

may also involve deception. Before 'fiasco' was used in theatre, it derived from the Italian phrase to 'make a bottle'. Why performance failures were linked to the bottles is unclear and disputed but, a 'fiasco' is a type of round-bottomed Italian bottle with its own tight-fitting straw basket. In 1574, a government decree fixed the capacity of the mezzo quarto bottle, with a vessel's capacity certified by a lead seal applied to its outer straw casing that stop purchasers seeing the contents inside. However, producers soon started re-using certified baskets on substandard vessels containing less liquid. As this fraud became commonplace, the Italian government subsequently decreed that the seal should be moved to the bottle's mouth to stop deceit.

The Brexit referendum was electoral process designed to enable voters to choose between the options an 'Remain' and 'Leave', supposedly two equivalent 'vessels' containing different policy contents. If these binary ballot options were the same 'size', as measured by the official standards set for referendums, then the electoral process would be democratic and the choices equal. Thus, the UK's Electoral Commission was tasked with choosing two official campaign groups that could be trusted to fill the two 'standard-sized' Brexit options fairly. By choosing 'Britain Stronger In' ('Remain') and 'Vote Leave' ('Leave'), the Electoral Commission put its seal of approval on their approaches, which may have misled voters into believing they were both trustworthy and viable policy pathways. At the time of the referendum, many voters were unable to see through the 'straw casing' created by the Electoral Commission's approval of Vote Leave as the official exit campaign, which stopped them seeing that the Leave option was an empty vessel, a policy deception.

Paper overview

Our purpose is to analyse whether Brexit should be labelled a 'policy fiasco' and to develop the concept of policy deception in the terms of how David Cameron, the Electoral Commission and Vote Leave helped create the Brexit policy fiasco. We first outline our conceptual framework of policy deception. Next, we analyse how Cameron's handling of the 2016 referendum led to his political failure by creating the Leave option for dramatic effect. Third, we discuss how the Leave option was included on the ballot paper even though it was not an equivalent thing in policy terms to the Remain option, which lead to a policy process failure. Fourth, we examine the multiple rationalities in the Leave option and how different situated contexts and logics of Brexit and the policy tasks set by the referendum result leading to programme failure when the UK government tried, post-referendum, to deliver the Leave option. Finally, we discuss how these political, process and programme failures combined to create the Brexit policy fiasco. We draw the conclusion that Brexit

was a policy fiasco and that policy deception may deserve further exploration as a concept in policy studies.

Conceptual framework

In 2019, the former Conservative prime minister, John Major, commented that, 'When the nation voted on Brexit, they did so out of fiction and undeliverable promises' (Kennedy, 2019). In our conceptual framework, we recast this Brexit fiction as policy deception. President Emmanuel Macron stated, 'Brexit is the choice of the British people … pushed by those who predicted easy solutions … those people are liars' (Merrick, 2018). We agree that the British people were misinformed, but we disagree with Macron's classification of this misinformation as lies. We believe there is an important difference between lies and deceit and that, to fully understand the Brexit policy fiasco, understanding the difference between them as different types of untruth is vital.

While policy studies has long identified a gap between constructions of policy success or failure and the actual value of a policy estimated by applied policy analysis (Bovens & 't Hart, 1996), the possibility of deception implied by the gap has not been explored. Policy deception refers to the case where there are politically constructed public beliefs that a policy exists but these beliefs have no basis in any actual analysis that develops and compares systematically policy options, through some process and by some criteria. In our framework, we borrow heavily from Searle (2017), who uses money as an example of deception. He reports that modern currencies are 'baseless' because they are not backed by anything. If customers enter a bank with $20 notes and ask to receive their value, they will not receive gold but instead similar paper notes. Searle (2017) argues that governments or banks do not use 'lies' because systematic deception does not require a 'conscious intentional liar'. Instead, he views deceptions as widespread illusions or systematic falsehoods that are related to, or built into, social systems. For example, monetary value is not real but 'observer-relative'. The worth of your money depends upon your own valuation of its power, and your personal valuation does not have a linear, fixed relationship with the ascribed face value of the notes (Searle, 2017). Therefore, the orchestrated belief that money has an intrinsic worth is a systematic deception.

We argue that a similar logic applies to the face value of a vote for the Leave option during the Brexit referendum. This option was baseless with no intrinsic value as policy. Whatever worth people ascribed to the value of their vote was observer-relative and could not be cashed-in for any agreed set of policies or political outcomes. Moreover, Cameron's failure to secure agreed terms for leaving before the referendum results were known contributed to the difficulty of cashing-in the UK's decision to exit at a value acceptable to the government, parliament and many of the electorate. Therefore,

although formal negotiations about the UK's future relationship with the EU have not yet been completed, Brexit may only be deliverable at a substantial economic loss to the UK rather than producing the substantial benefits promised by the Leave campaign. As a result, there is likely to be a significant difference between the expected and realised benefits of Britain's withdrawal. Using Searle's reasoning, this cost will be incurred because the Leave option was not based upon an agreed set of policies, with a known underlying policy analytical value.

To establish the validity of our approach to policy deception, we provide an account of the idea that the Leave option was real, organised and deliverable as a system-wide deceit enabled by the decision to list the Leave option alongside Remain on the Brexit ballot paper. To fully understand why the Brexit fiasco occurred, we must focus on how voters were systematically deceived into believing the Brexit referendum was no different from normal election campaigns in the sense that each of the voting options were real.

The Electoral Commission's remit was to ensure that the referendum was run with integrity and transparency of campaign funding and spending (Electoral Commission, 2015). At the time, there was no mechanism in place to ensure that Leave was real in the sense that the option was deliverable within a reasonable timeframe. As Cameron vowed to automatically implement the referendum outcome, the latter was now presented as an achievable policy alternative. If the referendum had not been declared by Cameron as a binding in/out choice, choosing to leave could have acted as a protest vote that stimulated wide-scale political debate and reform but with no real expectation that the UK would exit the EU. As political events forced Cameron to implement his in/out proposals, voters were faced with the Leave policy option, which was baseless in terms of contents, planning and delivery.

Applied in the current context, we could also say that there was a common misconception that, because it appeared on the ballot paper, the Leave option was backed by the 'something' of a UK successfully functioning outside the institutions of the EU. According to the ontological analysis by Searle (2017), the common misconception that baseless objects, such as money, are real is due to widespread systematic deception, which is possible because some objects and people have 'status functions' imposed upon them (Searle, 2017).

Political failure

Policy deception occurs when there is widespread belief amongst voters that a baseless policy option has substance, even though the option is not backed by something deliverable in the ways promised. In this section, we argue that

the Leave option policy deception was first stimulated by Cameron's misjudged political decision-making, which forced him to hold an EU referendum that with a baseless Leave option. The former Conservative prime minister, John Major, described Brexit as 'the worst foreign policy decision in my lifetime' (Price, 2019). Here, we outline how Cameron's political failure occurred, and suggest that his poor decision-making resulted in a widespread policy deception during the Brexit referendum.

According to McConnell (2010), political failures occur when detrimental policy outcomes affect the ability of parties and individuals to obtain or to retain their positions in government and in the political system. In this section, we argue that Cameron's personal decision to hold the Brexit referendum resulted in his personal political failure of having to resign his premiership. This occurred for three main reasons. First, this failure may be classed as Cameron's own fault because he personally chose the referendum policy option when other options were available. Next, he decided to make the result of the referendum politically binding when this political commitment was unnecessary. Third, he risked his premiership on achieving a Remain victory, when he could have distanced himself completely from the referendum outcome by choosing not to lead the Remain campaign. Given the combination of such factors, Brexit has been called Cameron's 'great miscalculation' (Glencross, 2016).

According to Brummer (2016), inflexible leaders who exhibit deficiencies in information gathering and processing seem more likely to end up causing foreign policy fiascos. Cameron's decision to stick steadfastly to his plans to hold an EU referendum to resolve 'party management issues' despite concerns from coalition partners, advisers and even Eurosceptic conservatives, suggests inflexibility (Oliver, 2016; Shipman, 2016; Smith, 2016). Alternatively, Cameron's victories in both the Alternative Vote referendum in 2011 and the Scottish referendum in 2014, along with his unexpected majority in the 2015 general election, gave him a reassuring run of political success. As such, Cameron may have become increasingly confident in his role as premier and believed that he could continuously win voter backing at the ballot box. This may have shaped his willingness to pursue his plans for an EU referendum regardless of the risks. This hypothesis fits with the common criticism that Cameron was a political risk-taker (Daddow, 2015; Smith, 2018).

Cameron thought an EU referendum would be a turning point in his battle against Euroscepticism (Hobolt, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2016). By offering an in/out ballot, he believed that he could simultaneously appease the Eurosceptics in his party, offer a less extreme political alternative to the UK Independence Party and end the growing political agitation by getting a better membership deal from an EU leadership fearful of a British exit.

Telegraph article

Cameron became prime minister of a coalition government in May 2010 because his Conservative party was not popular enough to govern alone. By 2012, he was accused of losing control as leader because of, among other matters, the rebellious call by 81 Tory members of parliament for an EU exit referendum (Kirkup, 2012). Cameron responded by writing an article for *The Daily Telegraph*, stating that he was 'not against referendums on Europe' but 'we need to be absolutely clear about what we really want, what we now have and the best way of getting what is best for Britain. We need to answer those questions before jumping to questions about referendums' (Cameron, 2012, para.2).

In his article, Cameron also addressed the political issue of which democratic process would give voters the most influence, writing that the 'problem with an in/out referendum is that it offers a single choice, whereas what I want – and what I believe the vast majority of the British people want – is to make changes to our relationship' (Cameron, 2012, para.9). Within a year, he changed his public position from political caution to openly accepting a simple in/out referendum. This unobligated change of course eventually led to his political failure.

Bloomberg speech

Cameron's initial attempts to resolve the Europe issue were ineffective. In January 2013, he tried to create a turning point in his political fortunes by announcing at the London headquarters of the private media company, Bloomberg, his intention to negotiate a new settlement with the EU and to hold an in/out referendum on the UK's membership (Cameron, 2013). As leader of a coalition government, he knew that his pro-Europe partners, the Liberal Democrats, would not readily support a membership ballot. As it was generally expected that another coalition government would be formed after the upcoming 2015 general election, this position was unlikely to change. Therefore, the decision to announce an in/out referendum alongside the intention to radically renegotiate the institutional arrangements governing the UK's membership was a strategic move rather than a plan that would necessarily materialise instantly. At home, his performance was regarded as a success with its intended political audience (Daddow, 2015). Delighted at the promise of an in/out referendum, Conservative MPs in Parliament 'greeted Cameron with massive cheering and waving of order papers' (Hoggart, 2013).

During the Bloomberg speech, David Cameron announced that 'democratic consent for the EU in Britain is now wafer thin' and 'those who refuse to contemplate consulting the British people, would in my view

make more likely our eventual exit' (Cameron, 2013). In contrast to the shackles applied by existing EU institutions, he would give the UK people the freedom to either support his new deal or leave the existing arrangements. As the situation required urgent reform, the enabling legislation would be passed as soon as the Conservative government won the next election, and a referendum would be held within the first half of the next parliament.

Process failure

In 2016, UK Parliament's foreign affairs select committee reported that Cameron's government committed an act of gross negligence and deepened the uncertainty surrounding the impact of Brexit by instructing Whitehall not to make any contingency plans for a vote to leave the EU (Select Committee on the Constitution, 2016). The Government had initially suggested it was the responsibility of Vote Leave to explain what Leave would mean to the voters (Smith, 2016). The Treasury report released in April 2016 only outlined the economic impact from three possible models, but did not analyse the viability of the Leave option in full (HM Treasury, 2016). The former Cabinet Office Minister, Oliver Letwin, told the committee that no Brexit plans were ordered because it was possible they would leak and seen as unwarranted interference in the referendum campaign.

Cameron's failure to initiate and to complete the steps necessary to make Leave a policy option to be implemented before the 2016 referendum is a form of process failure on three counts. First, no process existed for transitioning any member state out of the EU, so this ballot option was technically 'baseless' in the sense used by Searle (2017). Second, Cameron personally negotiated and agreed terms with the EU for remaining but not for leaving. Third, the Leave option that appeared on the ballot paper was not equal in political feasibility to the renegotiated Remain choice. The metaphorical Leave bottle was empty, but Cameron never expected it to be opened, so the lack of content did not matter.

Article 50

To withdraw from the EU, member states must follow the legal and political processes outlined in Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union, which states that 'Any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements' (European Parliament, 2016). European Council guidelines state that the EU shall negotiate and conclude an agreement with any country that notifies its intention to leave, setting out the arrangements for withdrawal and specifying the institutional framework for future relations. Following the Brexit referendum, the UK

government triggered Article 50 in March 2017, with the legal withdrawal scheduled to occur on 29 March 2019.

Given the complexities involved in securing an exit process with 27 EU partners with no pre-written blueprint, negotiating an exit deal within two years of triggering Article 50 was probably unrealistic. In 2016, the House of Lords reported that the government's failure to set out its exit plans 'caused uncertainty and confusion in the aftermath of the referendum' (Select Committee on the Constitution, 2016, p. 7) and recommended that,

> Parliament may wish, in future, to ensure that detailed consideration is given to how the result of any referendum will be implemented in advance of the vote itself occurring, and to whether explicit provision should be made in the enabling legislation either to implement the outcome automatically or to instruct the Government to act on the result.

The policy process for leaving the EU failed because the government did not negotiate implementable (EU-approved) plans for the UK's withdrawal. This process failure contributed to the Brexit policy fiasco.

Just as monetary denominations printed on paper notes are not backed by government gold reserves, the Leave option on the ballot papers was not backed by EU-approved, physically deliverable plans. Therefore, voters were systematically deceived by the official ballot if they believed their votes were exchangeable, upon demand, for new institutional arrangements for a UK outside the EU.

Programme failure

To leave the EU, parliament had to invoke Article 50 then negotiate an exit deal (within strict EU rules) agreeable to the other 27 member countries and to design and prepare for the implementation of a whole new suite of domestic policy to substitute for previous EU competences. To date, Brexit may be classed a programme failure because the policy outcomes suggested by the official Leave campaign have not been initiated within two years of triggering Article 50 (Vote Leave, 2016). It may be judged as being unsuccessful because the necessary and proposed programmes have not been designed and implemented within the expected timeframe. Trying to make the Leave option real has involved prolonged, but fruitless negotiations and imposed unexpected costs on the UK by creating economic uncertainty and the exit of investment, workers and firms.

Vote Leave framework

On 15 June 2016, during the last week of the campaign, Vote Leave published 'A framework for taking back control and establishing a new UK–EU deal after

23 June' (Vote Leave, 2016). The document states that, following a Leave victory, the UK government will need to create a roadmap outlining to parliament the legislative steps needed to give effect to the public's vote. According to Vote Leave (2016), there is no need to rush this important process because the 'principles of the new settlement are clear and will be based on free trade and friendly intergovernmental cooperation'. Reflecting upon past experiences, the document also claims that it will be possible to negotiate a new settlement with the EU by the 2020 general election. According to the Leave framework, the following circumstances would enable quick progress:

(1) Tariff-free trade between the UK and the EU already exists, so the parties will not need to negotiate the tariff lines on which duties will be abolished, only to continue the status quo.
(2) Regulatory equivalence already exists, so detailed negotiations about the mutual recognition of product standards will be unnecessary because regulations are currently identical. Since non-tariff barriers are few, there will be no need to negotiate their abolition.

As the actual progress of trade negotiations since the referendum suggests, Vote Leave's claims were misleading (Edgington, 2019). Exiting the EU has not proven to be easy. To date, securing a deal agreeable to all member states and getting parliamentary agreement to change domestic law has not yet been possible. There is a real chance of the UK crashing out without a deal in 2020 following Boris Johnson's win at the 2019 election (Woodcock, 2019). As no-one can predict the future, Vote Leave's misleading claims in their framework cannot be called lies, but they can be labelled deceptive and very unlikely to occur in practice.

The purpose of publishing the framework for taking back control just before the referendum vote was not to portray the truth but to support the systematic deception that Leave was a deliverable policy option. Ironically, the document also clearly acknowledges that Leave was an empty policy bottle that would not be filled until after a referendum success. In a political sleight of hand, Vote Leave tried to convince voters that EU leaders and the British parliament would be happy to fill the empty vessel once the Leave option had been chosen, even though they had no proof that an exit would lead to the ready flow of enabling policies and laws. Using Searle's example, this is similar to saying that the paper money in your pocket today is baseless, but in the future (if you vote for it) there will be gold.

Discussion

That Brexit is a complex phenomenon comprising a set of highly contingent combinations of factors over an extended temporal sequence is

widely accepted in the academic literature (McConnell & Tormey, 2019; Thompson, 2017). Its evaluation as a policy fiasco, however, is much less settled, either within the live arenas of ongoing Brexit politics or from the viewpoints of academic spectators. In their review of the study of policy failures over the last twenty years, Bovens and 't Hart (2016) revisit their long-standing argument that the fiasco label is not a neutral classification that may be applied externally according to objectively verifiable standards but rather something constructed in the 'framing contests' of politics.

In the practical politics of a referendum campaign, it is hard for voters to observe and to disentangle what is real. For instance, the Leave battle bus was emblazoned with the words 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead'. According to Cameron (Cameron, 2019, p. 688): 'It wasn't true. As Boris rode the bus around the country, he left the truth at home. We didn't send £350 million a week to the EU'. Regardless of the truth, the battle bus had a greater impact than Remain's conventional, staged political events. This is probably because the Vote Leave did not feel constrained by standard policy rationality or evidence provided by experts. Instead, their campaign was aimed at giving voters the opportunity to develop new, post -EU identities with claims about post-EU programmes that were not grounded in policy analysis. For instance, Vote Leave stated that voting to exit could generate benefits by stopping the UK bearing substantial costs when Turkey joins the EU (Ker-Lindsay, 2018). In reality, as a member state, the UK will not have to bear any costs of the country becoming an EU member any time soon because Turkey has no reasonable chance of meeting the entry requirements (the EU's 35 Accession chapters) in coming decades. In response, Cameron's advisers suggested that he announced that the country would not become an EU member while he was prime minister. He (Cameron, 2019, p. 669) writes:

> But I felt that would be irresponsible – the country was in the EU's waiting room for a reason. And by saying a veto was necessary now was tantamount to accepting that it could join shortly. So, paralysis had me in its grip. I was caught between being a campaigner and being a prime minister, and I chose the latter, it truly was asymmetric warfare, I made the wrong choice.

As this example suggests, Cameron experienced role conflict as the lead of the Remain campaign. While he was floundering, Vote Leave were able to make a whole range of deceptive policy promises and claims that, ultimately, helped them win the referendum. Therefore, we may conclude that Cameron caused the Brexit programme failure because he could not successfully perform his conflicting roles of EU negotiator, prime minister and political campaigner. In consequence, his failings helped create the Brexit policy fiasco.

Political failure

Given that the Brexit fiasco ended Cameron's career as prime minister, when did his political failure begin? According to Wright and Cooper (2016), the Bloomberg address was the 'start of the end of David Cameron'. This is because his change of direction created the possibility of an undesirable political outcome. Given this error in choosing an EU ballot, the writers ask whether Cameron was in favour of a referendum himself? They reply, 'We don't know for sure but the answer is probably not. That being said, Cameron certainly felt he had little choice over the issue' (Wright & Cooper, 2016: para. 12). However, Cameron knew the political risks because two of his predecessors, Margaret Thatcher and John Major, had been forced to resign over Europe divisions in the Conservative party.

Despite being advised otherwise, Cameron thought the referendum announcement was a gamble worth taking because, according to Wright and Cooper (2016), he believed the referendum would never happen. At the time, the prime minister calculated that Labour under Ed Miliband would not back the ballot plan, whereas his coalition partners were passionately opposed. Most importantly, in 2013, senior Tories – including Cameron – realistically thought they had no chance of winning an overall majority in the 2015 general election and that another coalition was likely. As a result, most people believed that the referendum pledge would be the first thing to go in coalition talks. If this was the case, there are grounds to claim that Cameron's referendum pledge was designed to deceive both Eurosceptics at home and political leaders in Europe.

Process failure

The Brexit referendum resulted in a process failure because the Conservative government was unable to deliver the baseless Leave option. The prolonged political negotiations held after Article 50 was triggered demonstrate that, at the time of the referendum, the Leave option was baseless. In Searlean terms, voters were systematically deceived by the promise of post-EU institutional arrangements backed by the necessary political, legal and economic arrangements. We suggest that Leave was not an implementable policy option but a baseless political positioning that the prime minister did not initially expect to enact in practice or predict would ever need implementing. Even as the UK formally leaves the EU on 31 January 2020, we still do not know much about the UK's future relationship with the EU and any terms decided will not be those suggested at the time of the referendum.

As the Leave option was introduced for political effect only, Cameron did not put the policy procedures in place to create a viable exit plan, secure agreement for that plan from other EU member countries or have a clear

and deliverable way to deliver the Leave option. As events forced Cameron to implement his political promise, the Leave option became a systematic deception that misled voters into believing that the official alternative to Remain was backed by something. Because EU leaders refused to accept the status function assigned to the Leave option, the post-referendum policy process failed to deliver the promised EU exit, thus contributing to the Brexit policy fiasco.

Programme failure

Given the lack of details about the type, nature and outcomes of policy programmes after an exit, Vote Leave deceived voters by suggesting imaginary political changes with imaginary socio-economic consequences. The key question is: why were so many voters deceived? Although there is a complexity of possible answers, Searle's (2017) ontology of deception provides important insights. First, the Electoral Commission gave Vote Leave the status function of being an official campaign group, which implied to many voters that their claims were legitimate. Next, the hypothetical value of the policy programmes suggested by the Leave campaign did not have to be based upon anything real. To work as a political currency, Vote Leave's claims only had to secure collective acceptance and did not have to be 'cashed in' at the time votes were cast.

The Brexit programme failure has its foundations in the political promises made by Vote Leave. The lack of pre-agreed terms for Britain's exit meant that Vote Leave could invent their own policy programmes and designate their face value without fear of contradiction. They could print their own 'baseless' political currency. In a conventional general election, parties produce manifestos outlining their proposed policies. In the EU referendum campaign, neither Remain nor Leave produced a traditional manifesto. However, the remain option had the clearly defined policy position of staying in the EU under the terms negotiated by Cameron and with forty years of accumulated policy development, whilst Vote Leave had no equivalent set of policies. In this void, Vote Leave made numerous policy claims and promises during the ten-week referendum campaign that did not later materialise and were able to claim that voters could 'take back control'. Such promises may be viewed as 'illusions' that, in themselves, they were baseless.

Vote Leave was established to run one campaign only and did not have to consider the consequences of deceiving the public in any further elections. They were in a unique political position. Under contemporary institutional rules, the government, Parliament and the Electoral Commission had no jurisdiction over the truth content of Vote Leave's political campaigns. Whilst Cameron led a traditional political campaign, his opponents had free reign to implement their version of populism, with official approval from the UK's

electoral institutions. The bottle was empty, voters were being systematically deceived, but Vote Leave had the official seal of parliament, the prime minister and the Electoral Commission.

Cameron's political gamble

Whether Cameron should be held accountable for the Brexit policy failure depends not on what he did but on the available counterfactuals that he did not follow. Thompson (2017) argues that Cameron's referendum decision was a gamble premised on the following assumptions. First, there was no prospect of the Conservative party winning the 2015 general election. Second, the other EU member states, particularly Germany, would not risk Britain leaving. Third, there was no realistic chance of a Leave vote winning.

David Cameron's memoirs were published in September 2019. He reports pursuing a 'renegotiation and referendum' strategy from 2015 because he was convinced that a poll would happen in the near future anyway and, under a more Eurosceptic Tory government, would probably not offer the possibility of EU reform. Reflecting upon this decision, Cameron (2019, p. 623) states:

> Writing all this now, I completely accept that my strategy failed to achieve the outcome I desired. But at the time – and subsequently – I believed that the risks of doing nothing were greater. As I have said many times, that doesn't mean I have no regrets, or do not believe that things could have been done differently or better in terms of the negotiation, or the campaign, or indeed the timing. But it is why I don't regret the central decision to adopt a strategy of a renegotiation and referendum.

According to Thompson (2017), the Brexit fiasco was not the accidental product of Cameron's personal failings or the idiosyncrasies of his judgement in relation to his party. At some point before the planned 2020 election, it was probable (but not inevitable) that the issue of EU membership would need to be addressed within the Conservative party. Although Cameron used a risky strategy to solve this problem, Thompson (2017) suggests that the problem was not with his judgement but with the fundamental political weakness of Britain's position inside the EU. In other words, the counterfactual situation would probably have resulted in a fiasco of some description or other, albeit at a slower pace.

Before the 2016 referendum, Cameron used political means to create the false impression that Britain was powerful in Europe and that he had the power to renegotiate the EU–UK relationship. In truth, his ploy did not work because the EU's leaders – particularly in Germany – realised that Britain was not well placed to renegotiate its position. Rejected in Europe, Cameron wished to create a good impression at home (Smith, 2016). With no real basis for claiming that he could secure a new deal, the prime minister resorted to the political device of announcing an in/out EU referendum as a

means of diminishing Euroscepticism and improving his chances of winning the 2015 general election. By doing so, he made the Leave campaign's case by signalling to the British people that they had little control within the EU and should be given the opportunity to leave. Unfortunately, Cameron did not predict that Vote Leave would be fronted by the team of Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings. During the ten-week referendum campaign, the popular politician and the astute political strategist fought the Remain campaign and won the majority of voter support (Shipman, 2016).

Is Leave deliverable?

Given our claim that the Leave option was a policy deception, the question remains of whether the referendum result can ever be delivered? During the General Election in 2019, Boris Johnson (who replaced Theresa May as prime minister in July 2019) used the slogan 'Get Brexit Done'. The use of this message implies that: (i) Leave is a real, deliverable policy option, (ii) Parliament, the EU and Remainers are stopping the Conservative government following this possible political pathway, and (iii) the failure to deliver the referendum result was a policy fiasco caused by key political stakeholders since the 2016 poll. In response, the former Conservative deputy prime minister, Michael Heseltine, said the slogan was a 'great delusion' because it heralded years of further negotiations not an instant end because 'The most you can do, if there were to be a massive Tory majority, is to get through the legislation to enable you to begin the talk about what the future relationship will be' (Buchan, 2019). In contrast to Johnson's optimism that all the details of our future relationship will be in place by December 2020, experience to date suggests that Brexit may not be done quickly, and will involve even more years of political and economic uncertainty (Rankin, 2019).

Given that UK voters were systematically deceived, how can the Conservative government negotiate an exit option that convinces voters that the baseless Leave option is deliverable? Again, working with Dominic Cummings as a chief special adviser to the prime minister, Johnson introduced the Withdrawal Agreement Bill, which passed (at second reading) on 20 December 2019 by 358 votes to 234, with a majority of 124. The legislation was required to ratify the withdrawal agreement made with the EU and ensures that the UK will leave Europe by 31 January 2020 (Hope & Sheridan, 2019). In an accompanying speech in the House of Commons, Johnson told parliament, 'This is the time when we move on and discard the old labels of Leave and Remain' (Hope & Sheridan, 2019). He added, 'In fact, the very words seem tired to me – as defunct as Big-enders and Little-enders, or Montagues and Capulets at the end of the play'.

Given our argument that the Leave option is a baseless, systematic deception, Johnson's speech is an interesting development. Trying to

deliver the undefined Leave alternative has been consistently problematic for the Conservative government and led to a political failure for Theresa May. Speaking in December 2019, the ex-Conservative government minister, Kenneth Clarke, said that the situation remained the same, 'I could never get out of Boris – and nobody so far could get out of Boris – what he has in mind for the eventual deal. To say they're generalities is an understatement' (Walker, 2019). In this policy void, by claiming that the Leave label is no longer relevant, the prime minister has been able to swerve the issue of whether this referendum option is deliverable or not. As far as UK legislation is concerned, the requirements of the Brexit poll will be delivered by 31 January 2020, but with detailed negotiations and policy development to follow.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that the greatest trick pulled during the 2016 referendum was way in which David Cameron, the Electoral Commission and Vote Leave convinced voters that the Leave option did exist. Even if Vote Leave had been honest in their campaigning and had lost the referendum, many people would have been convinced that Brexit was possible and could be delivered at some future point. In contrast, our analysis suggests that the referendum option (with its official seal of approval from the Electoral Commission), together with Vote Leave's political campaigning, deceived many voters and stimulated their emotions in ways that encouraged them to choose an empty policy bottle. If conventional, instrumental politics led by experts and analysts had played a bigger part in designing and describing the complexities of leaving the EU, then the straw casing of deceit may have been removed, exposing an empty political vessel. However, this raises the interesting question for further debate of whether, in post-truth politics, voters wish to be deceived because they desire particular policy outcomes regardless of the underlying truths.

Declaring Brexit a policy fiasco is not a neutral endeavour. Labelling political failures as fiascos is not an exercise based upon indubitable, objective facts, but relies upon the construction of narratives that embody debatable, subjective points of view. For many, the perspective that Leave was a baseless, systematic deception may conflict with their version of the truth. As an addition to the current policy studies literature, we argue the Brexit fiasco story should begin with Cameron and his construction of Leave as a (baseless) referendum option. Based upon this perspective, we conclude that Brexit should labelled a policy fiasco based upon political, process and programme failures that were intertwined with Cameron's policy deception, given the seal of approval by the Electoral Commission.

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